

Speaker at Georgetown's University Women's Club Canadians try to Light the Way for international children

By JANET DUVAL
Special to The Independent/Free Press

Imagine an orphanage in Bosnia, full of children whose lives have been shattered by war. Imagine a group of Canadians arriving with balloons, streamers, and smiles, and with the gift of friendship.

That's the dream that came true for Leslie Switzer, a founder of Light the Way Children's Fund International, and speaker at the October meeting of the Canadian Federation of University Women — Georgetown.

"The best gift I can give those kids is friendship," says Switzer. "The world has let them down so many times. I tell them to dream their dreams, believe in themselves, to have hope."

A Child Studies graduate with your children of her own, Switzer always wanted to work as a play therapist. When she watched TV images of frightened children in Sarajevo, she felt compelled to help.

With three friends, she started the Light the Way Foundation based on four guiding principles: travel to where the children are so you

can look their reality in the face; offer the best of yourself in friendship; listen to their stories and dreams with your heart; and never forget them.

Since then, as part of a team, she has visited hospitals, refugee centres, boarding schools, and orphanages in Croatia, Bosnia, Ukraine, and Belarus, home to thousands of victims of the Chernobyl nuclear accident. At each stop, team members offer activities that are cheap and language-free, such as face painting, dancing, music, and puppets.

Switzer also practises hand-on pain relief, a comfort to Chernobyl children with swollen brains and other symptoms of radiation sickness.

A special part of each visit is passing of the Dream Stone, a smooth black rock which has now been held by thousands of hands in five

countries. Each child in turn tells their wish, while other sit silent. "They dream of going home, of good food, or of finding a friend. They dream of seeing their Dad again, or of being well." Many dream of peace and a better world, even those with no families and little hope. Some Canadian children dream that their parents won't fight.

In Canada, Switzer speaks to school groups, raises money in Light the Way Cafes, and trains volunteers of all ages to join a travel team. She shows Canadian children how to make simple friendship gifts for children abroad, and collects Postcards for Peace, with children's pictures and wishes. This summer, she brought 14-year-old Katya from Belarus to visit her home for seven weeks. "Everyone smiles here in Canada," noted Katya. They don't in Belarus.

"I really believe I can make a lasting difference in children's lives," says Switzer, "just by giving them friendship. Think of the person who believed in you, who gave you hope. That's what I try to do for those children."



LESLIE SWITZER



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